

Needle stick injuries

A needle stick injury happens when the needle from a syringe used for injection accidentally pierces or punctures the skin.

Some children may be exposed to needles and syringes at home (for example, if a family member injects insulin), and sometimes a child may come across a discarded needle in a park or in other public places. Children should be taught never to touch a needle or a syringe, and to tell an adult if they find one.

When someone is injured by a needle that has been thrown away, there is no way of knowing whether the person who used the needle had an infection (such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C or HIV/AIDS). However, infections from needle stick injuries are extremely rare.

If your child is injured by a needle, several factors will determine whether there may be an infection:

- The number of people in your area who use needles and have infections;
- How much time has passed since the needle was tossed away;
- Whether the needle caused a deep injury or a scratch;
- Whether there was a syringe attached to the needle and bloody fluid inside the syringe;
- Whether your child has been vaccinated against the infection.

What infections can be passed by a needle stick injury?

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is the most likely infection from a needle stick injury. If your child has had the hepatitis B vaccine, a blood test will confirm whether she is protected. If your child has antibodies, she is protected and will not get hepatitis B. If your child has not received this vaccine or is not protected despite having been vaccinated, she can be given an immunoglobulin (IG) injection to prevent infection. IG has antibodies that will protect your child until her body produces its own antibodies in

response to the vaccine. Your child will also be given the hepatitis B vaccine to prevent infection in the future. The first dose of the vaccine is given immediately, along with the IG. Your doctor will arrange for your child to receive 1 or 2 more doses of the vaccine, if needed, over the next few months.

Hepatitis C

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine or medicine to prevent hepatitis C. However, the risk that your child will get hepatitis C from a needle stick injury is very low. Your doctor will discuss testing with you.

HIV, the virus that causes AIDS

Unless your child injected blood from a syringe attached to the needle, there is almost no risk that he will get HIV from this injury. Your doctor will discuss HIV testing and medication options with you.

Can the doctor test to see whether my child was infected?

Blood tests done just after the injury won't tell if your child has been infected. Your doctor can check for an infection by doing blood tests at approximately 3 and 6 months after the injury. It is important to return for these tests.

How can needle stick injuries be prevented?

- Teach your child never to touch needles and syringes.
- Make sure your child knows to tell a trusted adult – parent, teacher, police officer – if she finds a needle or syringe.
- Adults who find needles should make sure they are safely disposed in a puncture-proof, closed container, such as a glass jar with a lid.
- Communities should ensure parks and school yards are properly checked and cleaned on a regular basis.

SOURCE: Infectious Diseases and Immunization Committee.
Last revised: March 2008.

This information should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your physician.
There may be variations in treatment that your physician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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